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'Down with the kids'? Examining the male youth worker as role model and mentor to young men involved in violence.

In our book 'Responding to Youth Violence through Youth Work' (2016) Mike Seal and I argued that 'home grown' youth workers could occupy a prime position in terms of their ability to understand and prevent youth violence. This article sets out to further scrutinise that claim, by focusing specifically on one aspect of the youth work offer to the field of violence prevention: male youth workers who may have their own experience of violent offending and who are perceived as 'down with the kids' (i.e. with reserves of street social capital) being offered as potential role models or mentors for young men involved in violence (see for example Taylor, 2007). I want to suggest that the nature and function of relationships between such workers and young men has perhaps been talked about too loosely, both within and outside the profession. My intention is to tighten up that loose talk and interrogate the rhetorical tropes surrounding these kind of youth work relationships on several fronts.

The distinctive formulation of youth work relationships as voluntary, along with the emphasis on improvised, critical practice (Harris, 2014), presents an opportunity for youth work to secure a distinctive place alongside other professions seeking to engage young people who are involved in crime and violence. The current policy context of youth justice and youth work in the UK has arguably become focused on replicable programmes, generalised assessment tools and actuarialism, that centre on risk management (Cann et al, 2006; O'Mahony, 2009). This means that the youth work profession needs to carefully consider how it conceptualises its professional relationships with young people if it wishes to secure a place on the terrain of youth violence reduction. I want to suggest that relationships between young men involved in violence and older men (perhaps ex-offenders and gang members) can contain unconscious, heavily gendered and important generational features that a simplistic portrayal of a male worker as a role model to be admired and imitated cannot adequately capture. In turn, this requires an enhancement of the training and support for such workers, especially those who have their own experiences of violence and who may embody a 'professional ex-offender' or 'wounded healer' (Jung, 1951) subjectivity. I hope to reinvigorate debate about the potential of these kind of youth work relationships to respond meaningfully to violence and make some suggestions around the

shaping of youth work's professional development programmes. I suggest that this might involve the youth work profession being open to some less familiar psychodynamic ideas and moving towards a conceptualisation of youth work in this context as more fully psycho-social.

The home grown youth worker

On first impressions 'home-grown' male youth workers with their own experience of offending seem to bring much to the task of responding to violence, especially when the young men to be engaged are often mistrusting of adults. Through growing up in the area and having some personal involvement in violence, they have often acquired a large dose of street social and masculine capital (Ilan, 2013; Sandberg, 2014; de Visser et al, 2013) with the young men in their area. This can then be cashed in when they need to gain access to key figures in the community. Their empathy for the personal and social challenges faced by young men can help them to fully recognise young men's evolving subjectivities in ways that other professionals might find harder to do. Informal and resolute efforts to offer practical assistance and other advice and guidance provided by male youth workers may ultimately be more fruitful than more formulaic and de-contextualised interventions designed to manage risk. For male workers with their own history of offending, finding employment within youth work can also provide them with much needed social mobility. The journey from early involvement in criminal activity and the shift into a more generative (Erikson, 1959) stage in their own life cycle as a youth worker may provide a powerful redemptive script (Maruna, 2001) with which to make sense of their own lives. Professional qualification provides a route through the social barriers which confront them. Finding meaning and purpose through a youth work role as a professional ex-offender or 'wounded healer' (Jung, 1951) can even cement their own journey away from violent identities (Maruna, 2001).

However, male youth workers who embody the role model or 'down with the kids' subject position should not be so idealised that they become immune to critical analysis either. Processes of reciprocal identification, rooted in shared experiences, can drift into over identification and pre-reflexive complicity with some aspects of hyper-masculine identities (Seal and Harris, 2016). This may be part of the reason why, despite male worker efforts to intervene, some young men's violent behaviour and misogynistic attitudes might continue

unabated. If male workers over-identify with young men involved in violence, allowing them to avoid responsibility for their assaults and violent attacks on others, those young men may go on to inflict further physical and psychological trauma on new victims. This denial of responsibility (or neutralisation in criminological terms) ultimately also leads to their own continued entanglement in the criminal justice system. This will further restrict young men's opportunity to build a purposeful, fulfilling life. Where youth work interventions do not yield some results in terms of young men making different choices, this needs to be seen as a serious practice shortcoming.

Moreover, the male youth worker's personal biography can become interwoven with their professional identity formation in ways that they are not consciously aware of. Some workers who are attracted to the youth work profession may also be struggling with feelings that may be fuelling the psychic idealisation or vilification of women in their lives. Their relationships with young men can then begin to meet their needs more than the young men's and the worker's own perturbations can become inseparable from the task. Without sufficient training and support, such 'down with the kids' workers can become prone to *going* 'down with the kids' too. That is, they can descend into professional burnout (Vanheule, 2003) and even, should their circumstances change, perhaps return to the more troubling aspects of their former selves (Harris, 2019, forthcoming). This is especially concerning at a time when the changing professional context of youth work means it is unlikely that professional development and managerial structures will provide the financial and ideological sustenance for the intensive support and supervision that these workers require.

The reflexive use of street social and masculine capital by male youth workers can be effective when seeking to engage with young men. This is especially the case with young men whose psychic, linguistic and embodied investment in discourses of strength and invincibility may be serving the purpose of warding off feelings of vulnerability (see Boakye, 2017). Social constructions of youthful masculinity that valorise not 'backing down' mandate the psychic splitting off of vulnerability (Klein, 1946) and possible projection onto/into women or other young men in order to avoid the loss of social approval. This can introduce ethical and political tensions into the practice of male youth workers who seek to provide new means for identification for young men for whom hyper masculinity has become a

preferred gender performance. Professional identities can become complicit in the continued sustenance of patriarchal power. It is possible that male workers' professional relationships with young men might become (unconsciously) rivalrous and competitive. Male workers who embody forms of masculinity which gain immediate masculine currency within local youth subcultures may unconsciously act in ways that are complicit with symbolically violent power and the competitive pursuit of masculine capital. That said, as Batsleer (2015) identifies, male workers who embody more feminized or less racialized forms of masculinity may also face challenges in terms of gaining access and building rapport. The persistence of hegemonic discourses of what constitutes a 'real' man (that circulate in both dominant and subcultural contexts) combined with young men's psychic need to ward off of their own vulnerability, may mean that in order to gain access and maintain contact with young men there may be a need for what Batsleer calls some 'space and distance' from subordinate masculinities within some subcultural contexts. Understanding the practices and positionality of male workers and young men within these contexts requires acknowledging these complex and locally specific unconscious and intersectional dynamics.

Male workers need sufficient space to reflect on their own personal identity and professional practice before engaging in work with young men who may adopt identities that dominate and disparage others, such as those who embody more subordinate masculinities. This has pressing implications for anti-sexist, single-sex work with young men. Before young men can adopt new, less defensive gender identities, male workers may need to find ways to relinquish their own embodiment of these identities. Only then can they enable young men to relinquish the power such identities grant them in the street 'field' (Bourdieu, 1975). Male workers may need to disempower aspects of themselves as adult men in order to empower young men to (paradoxically) dis-empower themselves too. Male workers situated within local youth subcultural contexts need therefore to be able to move reflexively and fluidly around those subcultures as they seek to encourage changes in young men's thinking about themselves and how others think about them. This is a level of understanding to which the current youth justice and youth work training regimes may need to be further attuned.

Maximising the transformative potential of their practice involves male workers going further than simply offering a mixture of practical advice and emotional support as role models for young men to imitate. This task is further complicated when intersections of class, race, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991) inflect male subject positions that are being constructed within increasingly liquid modern societies (Bauman, 2000). Hegemonic discourses of masculinity still endorse norms and serve the ideological purpose of maintaining power inequities by idealising or devaluing certain subject positions. However, intersecting identity categories are not necessarily coercive, foreclosing and oppressive; they can facilitate growth. Swain (2006) argues for the consideration of what he calls 'personalised masculinities' that may contain elements of the hegemonic (for example, athleticism or a sporty persona) but which do not incorporate the wish to subordinate others. These masculine subjectivities are realised in 'particular places and contexts' (Hopkins and Noble, 2009, p813). Drawing distinctions between hegemonic and counterhegemonic youth work practices becomes difficult and requires a deep reflexive awareness of socially and spatially embodied agency, especially when workers are operating across generational divides in post-modernity. As Bhabha (1994) suggests, the term *post* does not signify that we are now in an era in which colonial or patriarchal ideology has been supplanted; rather one in which subjects are attempting to deconstruct the contradictions of history and improvise ways to move beyond its limitations into a more ambiguous area where cultures interact. Professional youth work training needs therefore to incorporate consideration of how these contradictions and ambiguities coalesce into late modern youthful masculinities.

A way forward? A fully psycho-social youth work?

One possible way forward is via the employing of key psychodynamic insights into inter-subjectivity and relationships along with these post structural insights into late modern identity construction. Psychodynamic ideas can enrich a model of relationships between the young person and youth worker in that they acknowledge the interaction between two unconscious minds operating within power relations that are both symmetrical and asymmetrical. What emerges is a view of professional relationships in which two subjects, both knowing and unknowing, defend against each other and the altering patterns of their interpersonal relationships. The challenge for workers becomes whether they can form a

fundamentally interdependent relationship – what relational psychoanalysts (Mitchell and Aron, 1999 call *a third space*. This is a reflexive space in the mind outside a dyadic relationship that creates a vantage point from which both parties can view the self. In this space male workers and young men can identify with each other, but also fully recognise each other too (Benjamin, 2017). Psychic recognition involves being able to connect to the other's mind while avoiding projection of unwanted parts of the self and accepting the other's separateness and difference. This opens up possibilities for the worker to reflexively utilize his feelings and experiences for the young person's benefit through, for example, self-disclosure (Harris, 2017). The impact of biographical experiences within relationships may be out of either party's conscious awareness but behaviour such as violence becomes more comprehensible within dyads if, at the very least, both parties can avoid foisting on the other a template of previous relationships imbibed in the course of development. Promoting a reduction in violence therefore involves building and sustaining these recognition processes within a relational space that can apprehend different experience, separate positions of self and other, and acknowledge interdependence.

Training and support for ex-gang member, wounded healer, male youth workers could and indeed, should, include the cultivation of a sensibility to these unconscious, intersecting and generational aspects of identity. That training should re-emphasise the importance of worker reflexivity and its significance within the distinctive practice of male youth workers working in the field of youth violence. In turn this implies an urgent need to reinvigorate debate around the value of these youth work relationships and the restatement of a professional commitment to high quality, routinised worker supervision. This professional supervision could emphasise and utilise a number of well-established psychodynamic concepts including reciprocal and over-identification, projection, transference and countertransference, recognition, and the function of third space within professional relationships. These concepts should not be seen as a replacement for, or alternative to, the Rogerian and Freirean orthodoxy that has dominated youth work's theoretical base. Neither does the valuing of these concepts preclude the need to focus on wider social factors in young men's lives, such as the impact of hegemonic discourses of masculinity, persistent social deprivation and lack of opportunities. Rather they should be seen as fruitful supplements to orthodox conceptualisations of youth work relationships. This

reconceptualization of youth work relationships as fully *psycho-social* offers a way to enhance the practice of male youth workers, especially those that embody a 'down with the kids' subjectivity, in ways that increase the likelihood of achieving more positive outcomes for young people who are in dire need of competent adult professional support.

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